

Getting a budget deal is big relief

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Washington Gov. Jay Inslee signs the two-year state operating budget, late Tuesday, June 30, 2015, at the Capitol in Olympia, Wash. Included in the budget are cuts in tuition for college students and an increase in funding of the state's K-12 education system. TED S. WARREN - AP

There are always reasons for regret around budget deals. But the agreement reached in the state Legislature this week on a two-year operating budget for state government leaves us with a sense of relief. State agencies did not need to shut down on Wednesday, and those residents who depend on public services can continue to receive them.

The compromise signed into law by Gov. Jay Inslee is a \$38.2-billion spending plan for 2015-2017. It represents a 13 percent increase from the last budget cycle and amounts to about \$4.2 billion in increased spending. It relies on a mixture of new revenues, a growing economy, some questionable fund transfers, and unexpected federal money to balance the books.

That the deal came after 166 days of hard slogging, which required a third special session, was testament to how politically divided the Legislature is. Republicans controlling the Senate and Democrats controlling the House both sought \$1.3 billion in new spending for K-12 schools to answer state Supreme Court rulings. Beyond that, Republicans opposed any tax increases, though they in the end agreed to some; Democrats demanded better funding of early childhood education, teacher pay and higher education.

Lawmakers remain hung up on suspending Initiative 1351, the \$2 billion class-size measure approved by voters last fall that is only partly funded in the budget. Putting

aside that issue and questions about the budget's sustainability, the overall spending plan contains a lot of good for our state. That's why there were large bipartisan votes for it:

- **K-12 schools receive about \$2.8 billion in new money**, some of which is a reflection of growing enrollment. Roughly \$1.3 billion is in response to the state Supreme Court's order that lawmakers fully fund basic education; \$350 million is for K-3 class size reductions. Lawmakers also ponied up for teacher pay raises and early childhood education programs.

It remains to be seen whether lawmakers met the court's expectations well enough to avoid sanctions under a contempt order the nine justices issued last fall.

- **About two dozen state labor contracts are fully funded.** This means that state workers, who have gone six years without a general wage adjustment, will see increases of 3 percent or more starting this month. They'll get another 1.8 percent in July 2016. So will teachers. Contracts also provide additional increases for state workers who qualify for step increases based on longevity and also for certain agency jobs dubbed underpaid that will get one-time adjustments to bring them in line with similar positions elsewhere.

Pay is important for retaining good workers. It is critical for the South Sound's economy where about 20,000 people, or nearly one in five job holders, work for the state government. Credit Democrats for leading on this.

- **Tuition for college is cut for the first time in state history.** The reductions follow many years of big increases during the Great Recession, which added to many students' loan debt. The cuts are 5 percent this year and grow to 15 percent at our two largest universities and 20 percent at regional colleges and Evergreen in the 2016-2017 school year. Credit Republicans for leading on this.

- **Big increases in mental health funding** help answer court orders.

Of course, there were missed opportunities to improve the state's unfair tax code.

But facing a deadline at midnight Tuesday — which meant accept this deal or shut down government — both sides chose wisely.

Read more here: <http://www.theolympian.com/2015/07/02/3800953/getting-a-budget-deal-is-big-relief.html#storylink=cpy>